



## Questions and Answers about the Constitution

### **Q. What is meant by the term "constitution"?**

A. A constitution embodies the fundamental principles of a government. All laws, executive actions, and, judicial decisions must conform to the Constitution.

### **Q. Does the U.S. Constitution give us our rights and liberties?**

A. No, it only guarantees them. The people had all their rights and liberties before they made the Constitution.

### **Q: Why was the Constitution written?**

A. The Constitution was formed, among other purposes, to make the people's liberties *secure*-- secure not only as against foreign attack but against oppression by their own government. They set specific limits upon their national government and upon the States, and reserved to themselves all powers that they did not grant.

### **Q. Are there original ideas of government in the Constitution?**

A. Yes, but its main origins lie in centuries of experience in government, the lessons of which were brought over from England and further developed through the practices of over a century and a half in the colonies and early State governments, and in the struggles of the Continental Congress. Its roots are deep in the past; and its endurance and the obedience and respect it has won are mainly the result of the slow growth of its principles from before the days of Magna Carta.

### **Q. When did the phrase, "The United States of America," originate?**

A. The first known use of the formal term "United States of America" was in the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Paine, in February, 1776, had written of "Free and independent States of America." The terms "United Colonies," "United Colonies of America," "United Colonies of North America," and also "States," were used in 1775 and 1776.

### **Q. Where and when did the deputies to the Constitutional Convention assemble?**

A. In Philadelphia, in the State House where the Declaration of Independence was signed. The meeting was called for May 14, 1787, but a quorum was not present until May 25.

### **Q. How were deputies to the Constitutional Convention chosen?**

A. They were appointed by the legislatures of the different States.

### **Q. Which State did not send deputies to the Constitutional Convention?**

A. Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

**Q. Who were the oldest and youngest members of the Constitutional Convention?**

A. Benjamin Franklin, of Pennsylvania, then 81; and Jonathan Dayton, of New Jersey, 26.

**Q. Who was called the "Father of the Constitution"?**

A. James Madison, of Virginia, because in point of erudition and actual contributions to the formation of the Constitution he was preeminent.

**Q. Was Thomas Jefferson a member of the Constitutional Convention?**

A. No. Jefferson was American Minister to France at the time of the Constitutional Convention.

**Q. Who presided over the Constitutional Convention?**

A. George Washington, chosen unanimously.

**Q. How long did it take to frame the Constitution?**

A. It was drafted in fewer than one hundred working days.

**Q. How long is the Constitution of the United States?**

The Constitution is the oldest and shortest written constitution of any major government in the world. The Constitution has 4,543 words, including the signatures.

**Q. When did the United States government go into operation under the Constitution?**

A. The Constitution became binding upon nine States by the ratification of the ninth State, New Hampshire, June 21, 1788.

**Q. Why is the United States government frequently described as one of limited powers?**

A. The United States government possesses only such powers as are specifically granted to it by the Constitution.

**Q. What is the Bill of Rights?**

A. The first ten amendments to the Constitution. The Bill of Rights was proposed to ensure that individuals would have civil rights and could avoid the tyranny of an overly-powerful central government.

-----  
Modified from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) website  
<http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution.html>  
by Rita Wilson, Government Documents Coordinator, UTSA Library  
rita.wilson@utsa.edu